

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 5th Sunday After Pentecost, July 9, 2017

The Father of Two Nations – A Biblical Soap Opera
July 9, 2017

Genesis 21:8-21

Today I am continuing my series on messages using readings from Genesis. In recent weeks I have discussed the creation story and the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham.

What I haven't mentioned thus far is Abraham's other son, Ishmael.

Because she had been barren and was growing old, Sarah gave her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham in the hope that she would give birth to a son, and thus give Abraham an heir.

Hagar was an Egyptian slave and was used by Sarah and Abraham to fulfill their dream of children. In the paternal culture of the time Abraham and Sarah were totally within their rights to use Hagar in this way. Today we would question if that was right but, back then, it was accepted even if Hagar objected and it eventually resulted in big problems for Sarah and Abraham.

Hagar was a slave but once Sarah selected her to give Abraham an heir, things changed.

If Hagar had been a concubine she would not have had a dowry and her children would be slaves just as she was. They would not be legitimate heirs.

When she was chosen to give Abraham an heir, things changed. She became a wife to Abraham, not a concubine. With the change Hagar could no longer be sold as a slave, but she could be divorced and expelled. Even so her son would still be a legitimate heir.

By sending her away she was being given her freedom and was being divorced at the same time. Neither Sarah nor Abraham would have any claims on her any longer.

But Sarah now had her own son, Isaac, so now there were two heirs for Abraham, Sarah's son Isaac and Hagar's son Ishmael. Ishmael was the elder son, another problem for Abraham to ponder. It sounds like a cheap soap opera doesn't it?

We don't know how old Ishmael was when he and Hagar were sent away. Our scripture reading seems to suggest that he was very young, but some Biblical interpreters have suggested that he might have been as much as seventeen years of

age.

In any event, Sarah did not want Ishmael to be accepted as Abraham's eldest son and thus be the heir to the great nation that God had promised that Abraham would sire.

Sarah was incredibly jealous of Hagar and Ishmael now that she had her own son. She even refers to Ishmael as the son of "*that slave woman*" who "*will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac*" and she banished Hagar and Ishmael from the household.

But it wasn't so simple as just sending them away --- not at all.

According to the customs of the time, Ishmael is a legitimate heir and Hagar's security as Abraham's legal wife laid first with Abraham and then with her son. So here we have a conflict over inheritance rights at two levels, to property of course but more significantly to God's promise to Abraham. The soap opera grows more and more complex.

The question now becomes through whom will the line from Abraham to the promised great nation that will inherit the land? Whose descendants, Isaac's or Ishmael's, will inherit that part of the world that we now call the Holy Land?

The soap opera gets even more complex. Sarah is trying to throw Hagar and Ishmael out but Abraham is ambivalent about doing it. He loves Ishmael and really doesn't want to do it.

What should he do? Send Hagar and Ishmael away or ignore Sarah's wishes. He has two wives totally at odds with each other.

Before Abraham can reach a decision, God intervenes and tells Abraham to do as Sarah asks. God takes the decision out of Abraham's hands. But, he reassures Abraham that all will be well and that Ishmael will also be the father of a nation, a different nation than the nation that was originally promised to Abraham. Now Abraham will be the patriarch of two nations, not one, the peoples that we now know of as the Jews and the Arabs.

One would think that this promise of God would end the soap opera like a fairy tale and everyone would live happily ever after --- but more drama is yet to come.

Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away giving them bread and water to sustain them. He gives them all that they can carry, but it is not enough. The water runs out and

Ishmael is dying of thirst.

Hagar can't face the suffering of her son. She puts him in the shade under a bush and prepares for his death moving just far enough away so that she can no longer see her son. She can't listen to his cries, nor can God.

God sends an angel to reiterate his promise that Ishmael will become the father of a great nation, tells Hagar to take the boy by the hand, and leads them to nearby lifesaving water.

Now comes the happily ever after. Ishmael survives and the second nation comes into being in due course. Ishmael becomes an expert with the bow and arrow and Hagar finds him a wife from Egypt. The soap opera has concluded.

But what about the two nations which eventually rise out of this soap opera? What is the relationship of these two peoples? Isaac becomes the father of the line that leads to Israel and which inhabits the promised land and Ishmael's line becomes Israel's southern neighbors, the Bedouin people, the Arabs.

God's promise to Abraham is not compromised in any way. Isaac's line becomes the Jewish people and from them Christianity evolves. Ishmael's line becomes the Islamic people --- two nations and three great world religions.

The story is, according to Fred B. Craddock, et al ⁽¹⁾, *"a gentle criticism of a national and exclusive theology. It is also a reminder that the God who watches over history also watches over outcasts."*

"The presence of God is evident in relationship to all of these characters [in our story]. A promise to an aging couple, a promise to be kept despite their fear and cunning, because God is God and keeps God's word. Care for the slave woman and her child. Care for this family on the margins. Care that does not keep them in their circumstance but responds to their changing circumstance. They are cast out, and God does not stop the action. But God meets them in the wilderness and provides a future and care in the present.

"We often wonder why there is suffering in the world, why God allows people to use and abuse other people (Whether it is culturally acceptable at the time or not). God is ever present, however, with those who suffer, those on the margins, and creatively works to bring goodness and care even where we humans have brought distress and alienation." ⁽²⁾

Amen.

1. Fred B. Craddock, et al, "Preaching Through the Christian Year - Year A,"
Trinity Press International, Philadelphia, 1992
2. A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series, compiled by Jessica Miller
Kelly, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2016

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011